A SERMON,

PREACHED

IN THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF SARUM,

AT

THE TRIENNIAL VISITATION

OF

JOHN,

LORD BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE,

On Friday, August 7, 1795.

By W. LISLE BOWLES, A. M.

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1795.

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TO

THE RIGHT REVEREND

JOHN,

LORD BISHOP OF SARUM,

THIS

SERMON,

(PUBLISHED AT HIS LORDSHIP's REQUEST,)

IS INSCRIBED,

As a Teſtimony of Reſpect and Veneration,

BY HIS LORDSHIP's

MOST OBEDIENT

AND DUTIFUL SERVANT,

W. L. BOWLES.

DONHEAD,
SEPTEMBER 4, 1795.

SERMON,

As a Testimony of Respect and Veneration,

MOST OBEDIENT

E. BOWLES.

A

SERMON.

St. MATTHEW, xviii. 7.

WOE UNTO THE WORLD, BECAUSE OF OFFENCES; IT MUST NEEDS BE THAT OFFENCES COME, BUT WOE UNTO HIM BY WHOM THE OFFENCE COMETH.

The immediate occaſion of theſe words of our Saviour, was a debate amongſt his diſciples concerning pre-eminence. They had imagined that his kingdom was to be eſtabliſhed upon earth, and they looked forward to thoſe temporal honors and emoluments which were to reward their attachment and fidelity.

Our Saviour in many paſſages of Scripture labours to remove this error, and in the preſent inſtance, he places a little child before them, and informs them, that "Unleſs they be converted, and "become as little children, they ſhall not enter into the kingdom "of Heaven."—Implying, by this ſtriking illuſtration, that they were to renounce all their miſtaken ideas of human greatneſs, and that, as his diſciples, they muſt be diſtinguiſhed only by the graces, peculiar to the innocence of early youth,—ſimplicity, meekneſs, and humility.

It was in this character, that they were to aſpire to the glories of a kingdom, "Not of this world;" and it was in this character that they were to encounter, upon earth, the prejudices, the paſſions, and the OFFENCES of mankind; for they were by no means to expect ſuch a ſtate of things, as ſhould accord with that ſingleneſs and purity of heart, here recommended; they were to be prepared for many croſſes and for many evils; they were to cope with calumny, perſecution, pride, ambition, and a hoſt of worldly luſts: But "Woe unto thoſe" adds our Lord, "by whom theſe OFFENCES "come;" OFFENCES, either againſt the perſons of holy and innocent men, or againſt the pure principles which they profeſſed and taught.

From the general connexion of the words of the text, we ſhall be led to the contemplation of our holy religion in its firſt and moſt ſtriking characteriſtic; we ſhall in the next place briefly advert to thoſe OFFENCES which it has had, and ſtill muſt have, to encounter from the depravity of the world; and laſtly, we ſhall reflect more particularly on the heavy reſponſibility attached to thoſe corrupters of its pure and genuine principles, to whoſe influence and example thoſe OFFENCES may be juſtly charged.

The firſt thing that ſtrikes us in contemplating the genuine character of Chriſtianity, is that engaging air of lowlineſs and ſimplicity, which our Saviour emphatically deſcribed, when he directed his diſciples to become as "Little children."

They, amongſt the more enlightened Heathens who had arrogated to themſelves the palm of learning and philoſophy, had founded their ideas of virtuous eminence on a certain awful elevation of mind; a hard and independent magnanimity, which could ſurvey with lofty indif-

indifference the changes and chances of human affairs. THEY argued concerning the dignity of virtue; THEY held out the fancied perfection attainable by our nature; THEY too, looked up, with eyes of doubtful expectation, to the clouds of Heaven, and the dim proſpect of another world: but there was nothing ſimple, nothing endearing, nothing in their cold ſyſtem that ſeemed to whiſper to the heart of man, ſick of enquiry, and ſurrounded with ſorrow,—"Come unto me, all ye "that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you reſt,"

With this pathetic appeal, behold, amidſt the pretenſions of boaſtful ſcience, Chriſtianity meekly coming forward. She does not lift herſelf aloof from the common cares of humanity: uniting the moſt perfect wiſdom with a humility the moſt engaging; ſhe appears with the ſame beauty in ſickneſs and in health; ſhe wears the ſame ſmile in joy and in tears.

In the ſeaſon of proſperity ſhe forgets not "Him from whom "cometh every good and perfect gift;" in the hour of anguiſh, her humble and pious prayer is, "Lord, if it be poſſible, let this cup "paſs from me; nevertheleſs, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

While ſhe explains the moſt awful truths, ſhe appeals to our gentleſt feelings; ſhe is our guide and comforter through the wilderneſs of our mortal pilgrimage: ſhe unlocks the ſilent priſon of the tomb: ſhe leads us through the "Valley of the ſhadow of death:" ſhe ſhews us the MIGHTY DESTROYER, bereft of his weapons and ſtrength: ſhe bids us take the "Wings of the morning," and ariſe from the duſt, to light and to life; ſhe brings us before the throne of "Him who "liveth for ever;" yet ſtill retaining her primitive and peculiar

 character,

chapter, whilſt ſhe joins the Hoſannah of Angels and Arch-angels, "Glory to God in the higheſt;" ſhe adds, "on earth peace, "good-will towards men."

Happy had it been for human nature, if the earth, with all its generations, could have echoed back in univerſal harmony, this hymn of glory and of peace: then, with purer affections and more enlightened underſtandings, we might have come before his preſence, whoſe myſteries were more clearly revealed to us, and have taken up the holy ſtrain, "Worthy is the Lamb that was ſlain to receive honor, and "glory, and power, and worſhip, and ſtrength." Then might we have looked upon the children of men, and ſaid, "Righteouſneſs "and Peace are met together; Mercy and Truth have kiſſed each "other;" but Chriſt who hath ſaid "It cannot be but that OFFENCES "come," hath taught us not to expect ſo perfect a ſtate of things in this life.

If the apoſtles, who were ſent into the world as "Sheep amongſt "wolves;" who ſtood innocent and harmleſs, as children, in the midſt of a crooked and perverſe generation, were expoſed to ſcorn, inſult, and perſecution; ſo alſo, many and grievous were the OFFENCES which Chriſtianity itſelf had to encounter from the evil paſſions and propenſities of human nature.

How ſoon was that pure light which aroſe "On them that ſat in "darkneſs and the ſhadow of death," obſcured and clouded! How ſoon did thoſe OFFENCES advance with rapid and gigantic ſtride, on whoſe diſaſtrous career we yet look back with horror! Chriſtianity no longer appeared in her genuine and artleſs beauty: tricked out in the motley trappings of Oriental and Grecian philoſophy, ſhe

ſhe no longer exhibited that ſimple and venerable appearance that beſpoke her the meſſenger of comfort from Heaven to a fallen and guilty world: her plain and pious laws were forgotten; a ſyſtem of ſpiritual uſurpation took place of innocence and holineſs of life; inſtead of the majeſtic image of truth, and the gentle train of ſocial virtues, were ſeen the monuments of miſery and of crimes: Inſtead of the voice that ſeemed to ſay to the conflicting paſſions of man, "Peace, Peace," were heard the cries of torture, and the ſhouts of triumphant perſecution!

It would be painful and unneceſſary to dwell on events thus afflicting. Thanks be to God, that, notwithſtanding the OFFENCES, which ſo long impeded its progreſs, THAT HOLY FAITH which ſhall finally prevail over ſin and death, burſt at laſt through the clouds and darkneſs of error and ſuperſtition. Its ſhining orb on high, ſo long dimmed by portentous eclipſe, came forth ſerene and in ſplendour: its aſcending glory was ſhrouded, but ſufficient light remained to guide us in the path of piety, to the land of our deſtined reſt.

And if ever we had reaſon to rejoice, it ſhould ſeem we had ſo at this time, when this our holy faith has been purified of its corruptions, its truths vindicated, its profeſſors diſtinguiſhed by an open and liberal ſpirit; and when the bigotry and perſecution, which appeared during the long tempeſtuous night of ignorance and barbarity, have been ſucceeded by principles more enlarged, and morals more refined.

But a ſtate of refinement has alſo its peculiar difficulties; not leſs ſo, perhaps, than a ſtate of barbariſm: if at one period, the patience

and

zeal of the wiſe and good, have been exerciſed in awaking the untutored mind to a ſenſe of duty and religion, in combating ſuperſtition, and vindicating Chriſtian liberty, and the rights of human reaſon; their abilities at another time, have been required to check the abuſes of this liberty, to correct thoſe extravagant refinements of reaſon, which carry men as far beyond truth, as barbarity leaves them ſhort of it.

Even now, whilſt we rejoice that REASON and RELIGION have burſt the bands of ſenſeleſs ſloth and abject ſuperſtition, where can we turn our eyes on the Chriſtian world without viewing OFFENCES which they have yet to combat, and mourning for the weakneſs of humanity. I might here call your attention to thoſe exceſſes and enormities which have lately taken place, at a period the moſt enlightened, and in A NATION THE MOST REFINED: but to point to ſcenes of horror and blood, would not become this place; and we pauſe at the remembrance of that voice which ſaid, "Father, "forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Let us rather turn and bewail thoſe manifold OFFENCES of which we ourſelves are at this time guilty; and let us kneel before "The "Lord our Maker," in deep humiliation.

The chief of theſe are to be found in the general laxity of religious principles, the public corruption of manners, and the bold and abandoned defiance of moral and civil reſtraints.

We are not, indeed, deſtitute of ſome feelings, which might do honor to our character and profeſſion. We diſplay, amidſt the proudeſt ſcenes of our ſplendor and luxury, the works of charitable munifi-

munificence: we ſupport eſtabliſhments for the poor, the aged, and the friendleſs; and we hold out a hand of liberal compaſſion, without regarding religious diſtinctions, to thoſe whom misfortune, or the chance of war, has caſt deſtitute and naked on our ſhores. Theſe things have their praiſe. But oh! ſpirit of holy Chriſtianity, where ſhall we now look for thy pervading influence? Thy ſimplicity and humility? Thy gratitude to Heaven, amidſt its bleſſings? Thy ſubmiſſion in the day of viſitation? Thy reliance on the protection of Providence? Thy prayer in a ſeaſon of dearth and danger, to Him who "Giveth food to the young Ravens that "call upon him;" who alone, is able to ſtill "The roaring of "the ſea, and the noiſe of his waves, and madneſs of the people?" Shall we find thee in the circles of ſplendid diſſipation! Shall we find thee among thoſe who kindle the ſtrife of uncharitableneſs, and party animoſity? Among thoſe who ſpurn the ties of a plighted faith, and trample under their feet the confidence and the endearments of domeſtic intercourſe?

We cannot look far without perceiving, in every rank of life, how little there remains among us, of that ſpirit which "Suffereth "long and is kind; which envieth not, which vaunteth not itſelf, is "not puffed up, is not eaſily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth "not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth."

But whilſt this appearance of univerſal degeneracy of manners, ſo oppoſite to the temper and ſpirit of Chriſtianity, ſtrikes us wherever we turn our view; let us reflect particularly on the heavy reſponſibility attached to thoſe, to whoſe influence or example theſe OFFENCES may be juſtly charged.

WOE UNTO HIM, BY WHOM THE OFFENCE COMETH.

We cannot here avoid looking towards thoſe, who from fortune, education, or profeſſion, hold the moſt diſtinguiſhed rank in civilized ſociety. If theſe Men are found deficient, if THEY forget their duties, if THEY abuſe their truſt, if THEY abandon the cauſe which they were bound to defend, the more alarming will be the evil, and the greater their condemnation. Do thoſe, let us firſt aſk, who move in the moſt elevated ſphere of life, exhibit that fair example which might adorn their ſtation?

Let that vaunting profligacy proclaim the anſwer, which lifts up its head in ſcorn, whilſt "The covenant of God is deſpiſed, the "ways of Sion do mourn." It is to theſe who ſet the example of levity and licentiouſneſs; who waſte their time, and the talents committed to them for higher purpoſes, in guilty diſſipation; that "Wiſdom uttereſt her voice," that ſhe cries in the chief places of the city, "How long will the ſcorners delight in ſcorning, and "fools hate knowledge? Turn ye at my reproof." The time may come, when ſhe may add, "Ye have ſet at nought my counſel, and "would none of my reproof. I alſo will mock at your calamity, "I will laugh when your fear cometh! Then ſhall they call upon "me, but I will not anſwer, they ſhall ſeek me, but they ſhall "not find me!"

All are not ſuch: there are, who have prefered to the tumult and contagious depravity of public life, the ſtill vale of their patrimonial inheritances, where they might adminiſter juſtice to the oppreſſed, encourage the induſtrious, cheer the aged and the helpleſs, and ſhed the ray of comfort on the circle around their reſidence!

But

But we turn from theſe cheering examples, to another claſs of public Offenders among us, of whom, alſo, much undoubtedly will be required.

To mingle inſtruction with delight, to form the young mind to habits of piety and virtue, to tear off with manly abhorrence, the maſk of ſenſuality, or licentious philoſophy; to exhibit in clearer colours, the majeſtic and beautiful portrait of Truth, is the nobleſt province of thoſe, to whom God has given ſuperior endowments. Nor are there wanting in this age, abaſed and abandoned as it is, characters of the higheſt attainments in literature, who have been the moſt powerful advocates of piety and religion. To that illuſtrious claſs who have ſo ably ſtood forth as the champions of our faith, let us add, with gratitude and reſpect, thoſe * who have rendered the leſſons of early inſtruction, more captivating and impreſſive; and in particular, one, † who not only with the moſt powerful eloquence, has ſhewn the evil conſequences of the depraved manners of the Great; but in a mode the moſt novel, and with views the moſt diſintereſted, has opened the page of humble inſtruction, to the laborious poor.

Whilſt we think with ſatisfaction, on theſe examples, what ſhall we ſay to thoſe, who have not only deſerted the cauſe of virtue, but have been active on the ſide of immorality and vice?

* Mrs. Barbauld, &c.

† See Mrs. Moore's "Thoughts on the Manners of the Great," and her cheap publications for the lower claſs.

What ſhall we ſay to thoſe baleful Offenders, the corruptors of the youthful and innocent mind, who by artful and licentious repreſentations, endeavour to weaken the hold of morality, and to pervert the beſt feelings of the heart? For This, has the moſt alluring fancy, for This, has the moſt enſnaring ſophiſtry, for This, has the moſt ſpecious eloquence been employed; to aſſail the vital principles of moral rectitude, and to exhibit, inſtead of the chaſte pattern of domeſtic love, and ſober truth, the meretricious yet elegant figure of ſentimental profligacy!

What ſhall we ſay to thoſe alſo who oppoſe their ſchemes of falſe and licentious philoſophy, to the ſublime, the ſimple, the conſoling doctrines of our Chriſtian faith? Who ſport with our beſt hopes? Who would rob us of our pureſt comforts? Who would perſuade us that we are left helpleſs and abandoned in the immenſity of the univerſe, without a Father in Heaven to behold us, or a God to reward our truſt in his mercies? The time would fail me to enumerate other OFFENCES and other Offenders againſt religion and morals, againſt civil reſtraints, againſt laws and ordinances, againſt the plain and practical duties of contentment, ſobriety, candour, and brotherly love!

But enough has been ſaid, to ſhew us how many OFFENCES we have to deplore and to correct. We may behold among the rich, a ſpirit of levity and licentiouſneſs: an open defiance of religion and its moſt awful ſanctions: we may behold the morals of the riſing generation vitiated: we may hear the name of our moſt holy faith openly blaſphemed: and we may perceive all the harmonious ſubordinations of ſocial life, jarring and diſcordant.

In

In looking at the OFFENCES which ſurround us, whilſt we remember the ſimplicity which the Goſpel requires, have we, the Miniſters of that Goſpel, inveſted with a peculiar character, and ſtanding in a diſtinguiſhed ſituation, no queſtions to aſk ourſelves? Whilſt we lift up our voice againſt thoſe, by whoſe fault "OFFENCES come;" may we not enquire of our hearts, and like the Diſciples of our Saviour, when one amongſt them was denounced as faithleſs, ſay with fearful anxiety, "Lord, is it I?" Have I been in any ways inſtrumental in promoting thoſe OFFENCES, which it was my duty to repel? Have I, by an upright and conſcientious conduct, endeavoured to exhibit a blameleſs example, in the midſt of a corrupt and perverſe generation? Have I ſtudied to adorn the doctrine I profeſs, and thought only upon "Whatſoever "things are true, whatſoever things are lovely, whatſoever "things are of good report?"

The beſt of us, perhaps, conſcious of human infirmities, may have reaſon to ſmite on his boſom, and ſay, "God be merciful to "me a ſinner." But we ſhould remember, that from us is required, in a ſeaſon of reigning depravity, a more circumſpect conduct; and a clearer teſtimony of chriſtian virtues. Heavy will be the charge againſt thoſe to whom it may be ſaid, in the language of the accuſing Prophet, "The diſeaſed have ye not ſtrengthened; "neither have ye healed that which was ſick; neither have ye "bound up that which was broken; neither have ye brought again "that which was driven away; neither have ye ſought that "which was loſt!"

"Seeing then that we have a great high prieſt that is paſſed into "the Heavens, Jeſus the ſon of God, let us hold faſt our "profeſſion."

When

When the uproar of a careless and corrupt age, reaches to our very retirements, may we at least be found blameless; may we hold fast the pure consolation of a good conscience, in a world of sorrow and corruption; and may we be hereafter admitted to brighter scenes, to a region of more unsullied enjoyment, by a quiet and inoffensive course, through the paths of holiness, peace and charity!

F I N I S.